

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Because I am a Girl

THE STATE OF THE WORLD'S GIRLS 2012

Learning for Life



Plan



Learning for life

"In Malawi, especially in rural areas, girls meet a lot of challenges and because I am a girl I would like to fight for my rights and girls' rights too. We are also human beings who need to be respected."

Elizabeth, secondary school student from Malawi¹

Every girl has the right to education but there are 39 million 11-15 year-old girls out of school.² The 2012 'Because I am a Girl' report, the sixth in the annual report series, focuses on girls' education and is particularly concerned with what happens to girls when they reach adolescence. At this age, their domestic and reproductive roles begin to dominate their lives at the expense of learning. Despite reaching global parity in primary school level enrolment³, completion rates for girls still lag behind boys, and,

'Because I am Girl' is an annual report published by Plan which assesses the current state of the world's girls. While women and children are recognised in policy and planning, girls' particular needs and rights are often ignored. These reports provide evidence, including the voices of girls themselves, as to why they need to be treated differently from boys and from adult women. They also use information from a small primary research study set up in 2006 to follow the lives of 142 girls from nine different countries. Previous reports include girls "In the Shadow of War", "Girls in the Global Economy", "Girls in a Changing Landscape" which looked at new opportunities in cities and at ICTs and "So, What About Boys?" which in 2011 looked at the role of men and boys in gender equality. The reports include recommendations for action, showing policymakers and planners what can make a difference to girls' lives all over the world. Plan is an international development agency and has been working with children and their communities in 48 countries worldwide for 75 years.

¹ Plan International. 'Because I am a Girl: Elizabeth in her own words.' March 2012. <http://http://bcimagirl.tumblr.com/> (last accessed 12 April 2012).

² UNESCO. 'Education For All Global Monitoring Report: The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education.' Paris: UNESCO, 2011. ³ United Nations. 'The Millennium Development Report 2012.' New York: United Nations, 2012.

as research for this report has found, at adolescence the pressures of poverty and discrimination mean that girls leave school: to help at home; because their families are not convinced of the value of their education; because they experience violence at school; because they get pregnant or married; because school is too far away and their parents think their daughters, and their reputations, are at risk.

Governments all over the world have a chance to change this, to make a commitment to nine years of quality education and to acknowledge in their budgeting, and in their education sector plans, the specific needs of adolescent girls; recognising the particular challenges they face to achieve gender equality and social justice.

This year, a new global initiative on education, led by the UN Secretary-General, accepts the imperative to protect education budgets during hard times. It also states that, despite much progress in recent years, “the quality of education remains desperately low in many parts of the world”. The new post-Millennium Development Goals (MDG) agenda should prioritise the quality of learning in school and acknowledge that, unless the needs of adolescent girls are taken on board, many of the internationally approved targets of reducing poverty and achieving gender equality will never be met.

The 2012 ‘Because I am a Girl’ report is calling for nine years of quality education for all as the key to protecting and promoting girls’ rights to education; and enabling girls and young women to play a significant role in their communities and in breaking the intergenerational cycle of poverty.

“Girls’ education was not a priority for most people. Most people married off their young girls to escape from high levels of poverty. Water, health and food were the most pressing needs of the communities.”

Ayesha, 14, South Sudan⁴

This report looks in detail at why, despite much effort and good will, girls still lose out at school and at home. How can we keep all girls in school, including the poorest and most marginalised, improve the quality of the education they receive and empower them to take their rightful place as equal citizens?

As they reach adolescence in particular, girls and young women need to be able to achieve their potential; quality learning for life is at the heart of this.

Not just the means to an end

“Education is a right, but it is not a reality for too many women and girls. Education sends a message – a message of confidence and hope. It tells that child: you have a future; what you think matters.”

United Nations Secretary-General’s Global Initiative on Education 2012

For more than 200 years, a strong moral argument has been made for education for girls, grounded in human rights and equality. Any argument in support of more and better education for all girls needs to recognise the intrinsic importance of education for girls’ empowerment, not just its value as a training ground for the world’s future workers and mothers.⁵ It is a view of education closely associated with human dignity, not simply as a means to a wider end.

THE RIGHTS FRAMEWORK⁶

Used in the report to analyse girls’ educational needs:

- Rights to education: Access and participation.
- Rights within education: Gender-aware educational environments, processes and outcomes.
- Rights through education: Supports gender equality leading to wider social justice.

⁴ Plan South Sudan. ‘Newsletter December 2012.’ Internal Document, 2012. ⁵ Unterhalter, E. ‘Gender, schooling and global social justice.’ London: Taylor Francis Routledge, 2007. ⁶ Subrahmanian, Ramya. ‘Gender equality in education: Definitions and measurements.’ International Journal of Educational Development 25, (2005) http://pearsonfoundation-irc.org/genderandeducation/PDF/1.2_Gender_equality_educat.pdf (last accessed 25 May 2012).



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Enrolment is not enough

“Maybe one day when my siblings are a bit older I could go back to school. I would learn and pass all my subjects, and then I could have a better job and a better life. Sometimes, I dream about becoming a teacher or maybe a nurse.”

Talent, 14, Zimbabwe

Today, young people spend more of their adolescence in school than ever before. Adolescent girls in 2009 had a mean of six years of education in their lifetimes – up from fewer than four years in 1990.⁷ Global trends in population growth, improved health and greater urbanisation have all contributed to this trend, but the achievements are mainly due to significant increases in investment and commitment to access to education around the world.⁸

It is right that these achievements are celebrated – as they are sure to be in 2015 when heads of state gather at the United

Nations to report on progress against the Millennium Development Goals – but this is not the whole story.

While the pace of increase in girls’ enrolment in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and East Asia has been significant – and faster than boys’ – the girls who are seeing the greatest increase tend to be urban and rich.⁹ Even in countries on track to meet global targets for enrolment and gender parity, girls from the poorest, hardest to reach, or most discriminated against communities are still left behind.¹⁰

Enrolment is an inherently flawed measure of access. It is captured on one day – sometimes the first day – of the school year and can only really show whether children turned up to school on that day.¹¹ Enrolment is not a true measure of whether girls are actually going to school on a regular basis or of whether they are learning anything while there.

In 2004, the amount needed to be spent on basic education for all was less than the amount the USA and Europe spent on ice cream (\$31 billion) and not much more than on cosmetics (\$18 billion).¹² Most significantly, it is only one 70th of the \$1.6 trillion the world spent on arms in 2010.¹³

In many regions of the world, we see three factors common to girls who have the least chance of going to school and staying there:

- they are poor;
- they live in rural areas;
- they come from ethnic groups that are discriminated against or excluded.

In the poorest 20 per cent of households in the world, only 64 per cent of all school-aged children enrol in school, compared to 90 per cent of children in the richest 20 per cent of homes.¹⁴ When adding a gender dynamic to this statistic, a bleak picture emerges. Girls in the poorest households are most likely to be excluded from school altogether.¹⁵

7 Lloyd, Cynthia B. (Ed.) 'Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries'. Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2005. 8 Lloyd, Cynthia B. ed. 'Growing Up Global: The Changing Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries'. Washington DC: National Academies Press, 2005. 9 UNESCO. 'Education For All Global Monitoring Report: The Hidden Crisis: Armed Conflict and Education.' Paris: UNESCO, 2011. 10 Levine, Ruth, Cynthia Lloyd, Margaret Greene, and Caren Grown. 'Girls Count: A Global Investment and Action Agenda.' Washington, DC: Centre for Global Development, 2008. 11 Banjeree, Abhijit V. and Esther Duflo. 'Why Aren't Children Learning?' Development Outreach, 2011. 12 Halweil, Brian, Lisa Mastny, Erik Assadourian, Christopher Flavin, Hilary French, Gary Gardner, Danielle Nierenberg, Sandra Postel, Michael Renner, Radhika Sarin, Janet Sawin, Amy Vickers. 'State of the World 2004: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society.' Washington DC: Worldwatch Institute, 2004. 13 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'Background paper on SIPRI military expenditure data, 2010.' Citing: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. 'SIPRI Yearbook 2011: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security.' Oxford University Press, July, 2011. 14 UNICEF. 'Progress for Children: Achieving the MDGs with Equity.' New York: UNICEF, 2010. 15 Lake, Anthony. 'UNGEI Global Conference on Girls: Opening Ceremony Remarks Speech.' Dakar, Senegal: UNICEF, 17 May 2010. http://www.unicef.org/media/media_53665.html (last accessed 23 May 2012).

BARRIERS TO GIRLS' EDUCATION

In a recent research study in seven African countries, Plan examined the challenges adolescent girls face to get in to, and to stay in, school. The issues are complex and numerous.¹⁶

- 1 While primary education is nominally free in all the countries studied, all families noted that they still face a number of charges, even at primary level, for their children's education, including the cost of supplies, uniforms and transport. In Ghana, 46 per cent of children interviewed felt that the lack of school materials and uniforms was the main difficulty faced in going to school, and a further 14 per cent cited their inability to pay school fees.¹⁷
- 2 Teacher-pupil abuse and sexual exploitation is prevalent across all the countries. When asking about early pregnancy, Plan's researchers in Togo found that 16 per cent of the children interviewed named a teacher as responsible for the pregnancy of a classmate. The figure was 15 per cent in Mali and 11 per cent in Senegal. In Ghana, 75 per cent of children cited teachers as the main perpetrators of violence in school; in Senegal the figure was 80 per cent.
- 3 Early pregnancy is common and leads to drop-out, forever limiting a girl's chances of finishing school, even if she does return. In Liberia, 61 per cent of children knew of at least one girl who had fallen pregnant in the last two school years; only five per cent of children said that the girl(s) had returned to school after the birth. In some countries, girls exchanging sex for money to pay for school fees and materials, however negatively viewed, is a common practice. Beliefs that the only role girls can have is as wives and mothers, have a negative impact on girls' social development and their educational goals. In Ghana, 83 per cent of parents listed the possibility of girls falling pregnant as a disadvantage of schooling girls.
- 4 The high number of hours girls spend on household chores negatively affects their ability to learn. In Guinea Bissau, Plan's study found that girls work an average of eight hours a day on household chores compared to an average of three hours for boys. Tiredness and lack of time for schoolwork were listed as consequences of this burden.
- 5 High levels of poverty affect both boys' and girls' nutrition, and few school-feeding programmes exist to alleviate this. In Mali, one group of children commented that they had been forced to close their school canteen this year due to lack of support from NGOs or the government, and were unable to bring food from home due to bad harvests. This had a significant impact on overall attendance.

When poor parents make a decision about which child is more likely to gain from education, which is a long-term investment, a girl's immediate usefulness as a caretaker, her worth as a bride, or her contribution through domestic or other labour can be deemed more valuable than an uncertain and unproven return from her education in the future.¹⁸

Given resource constraints on the part of governments and donors, it makes sense to concentrate resources where they are most needed – and that is among the poorest and most marginalised communities. Conditional cash transfers and/or scholarships will be insufficient to address girls' most critical needs, particularly for the poorest among them, without complementary inputs to strengthen school quality. This is because the poorest girls attend the poorest schools and come from families with the least capacity, in terms of time and education, to support and reinforce their learning. This might suggest a school-based approach, in which marginalised schools are identified for support with supplementary but limited resources also provided to the neediest girls. Sustainability will require time; indeed, the time for a next generation of girls to be educated and empowered to take up positions of influence and leadership in their communities.

Cynthia Lloyd

¹⁶ Lucas, Natalie. 'Girls' retention and performance in primary and secondary education. Makers and breakers: A research project to investigate the dynamic of factors influencing school retention and performance of girls in Africa'. Plan, 2012. (Unpublished). ¹⁷ Lucas, Natalie. 'Girls' retention and performance in primary and secondary education. Makers and breakers: A research project to investigate the dynamic of factors influencing school retention and performance of girls in Africa'. Plan, 2012. (Unpublished). ¹⁸ Plan International. 'Because I am a Girl: The State of the World's Girls 2009, Girls in the Global Economy: Adding it all Up'. Plan International, 2009.

What is learning?

“My mathematics teacher asked me to fall in love with him, but I found it difficult for me to do that. This became a problem between us. Any small mistake or bad thing I did I am almost always punished. This was one of the reasons I hate school and dropped out.”

Adolescent girl, Sierra Leone¹⁹

Learning is not just about numeracy, literacy or even life skills. What girls learn about themselves – as girls and as members of the communities and societies in which they live – is also critical. The values that the school passes on to students, both boys and girls, are as important as the official curriculum.

Are girls taught that they are not as clever as boys? Are they told that girls don't do maths and science? Do they learn that women should be subservient to men because all the pictures in the textbooks depict them this way or because it's always girls whom the teacher asks to clean the classrooms or fetch tea? Or are they learning how to make decisions and choices and to understand the world, so that when they leave school they will have the power to lead lives they value?

Education alone is not a cure for all of society's ills, but a good education can give girls the skills and competencies they need to choose their own career path, have healthy positive relationships with their partners, families and friends, and enable them to make positive decisions about their bodies and their health.

As such, a quality education – what you learn and what it is like in school for you – is the key to unlocking opportunities in adulthood.

“I think boys are confident enough and they can ask questions in the class. This gives teachers the idea that they are understanding the topic and boys are intelligent. We girls also want to ask questions, but we are shy and cannot ask questions. Thus, we become only listeners in the class.”

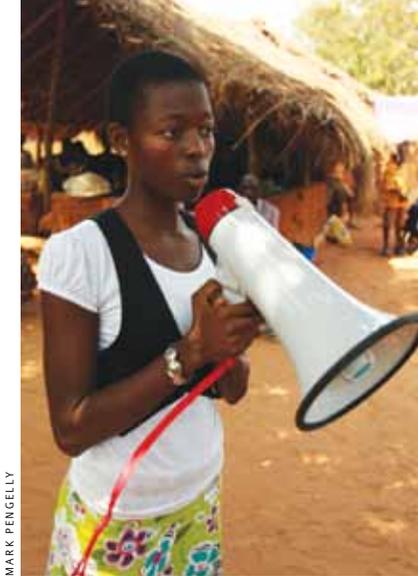
Girl, Pakistan²⁰



Girls will not learn just by enrolling in or even attending school regularly. There are a number of obstacles and challenges adolescent girls continue to face while they are in education. By placing gender equality at the heart of learning, each of these challenges can be turned into an opportunity. Teacher-training courses need to explore gender in a way that allows teachers to reflect on their own understanding, as well as to challenge the discrimination and beliefs that result in inequality. Educators can look not just at the number of resources and teachers, but at how those resources are being used and by whom, and at what and how teachers are teaching. By looking at these issues from the perspective of adolescent girls, education systems can remove the barriers which are preventing girls from learning.

LUCA TOMMASINI

¹⁹ Mukhopadhyay, M., N. Mudge, L. Wolmarans, and C. Hunter. 'DFID PPA funded "Building Skills for Life for Adolescent girls" Programme: Global Baseline report prepared for Plan UK by KIT. Final Report.' Amsterdam: KIT, 2012. ²⁰ Page, Elspeth and Jyotsna Jha (Ed.). 'Exploring the Bias: Gender Stereotyping in Secondary Schools.' London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 2009.



WHY LEARNING FOR LIFE IS SO IMPORTANT FOR ADOLESCENT GIRLS

Adolescent girls stand at the doorway to adulthood. If adolescent girls stay in school and obtain real skills, research shows that they will earn more income in the future, marry later, and have fewer and healthier children. In the longer term, secondary education protects girls against HIV and AIDS, sexual harassment and human trafficking. In short, secondary education, in combination with financial assets and life skills, is essential for adolescent empowerment, development and protection.

The essential outcome of education should be concerned with wider social justice. Without education, equality goals will be unreachable. But education alone is not sufficient. In both Latin

America and the Middle East, recent increases in female education levels have not led to corresponding equality in the work-place or at home.²¹ Girls and young women still emerge struggling with the idea that they are second-class citizens. If they are to play an equal part in society, once they finish their education, that education must be truly empowering and equip them with the capacity and determination to challenge the discrimination they will inevitably face.

Girls taking control

Education for girls goes beyond rights; it must be concerned also with what they are able to do with those rights in the key areas of their lives: health, relationships, work and citizenship.

A good-quality education, for example, should make it possible for girls to make their own decisions and choices about healthcare and reproduction.²²

- Adolescent girls who are in school are likely to marry later.
- They are less likely to have premarital sex and more likely to use contraception.
- Even completion of primary school is strongly associated with later age at marriage, later age at first birth, and lower lifetime fertility.^{23,24}
- Research shows that as women gain four additional years of education, fertility rates drop by one birth, but girls with fewer than seven years schooling are more likely to be married by age 18.²⁵
- An eight-country study from 1987 to 1999 concluded that a girl's education from secondary level onwards is the most consistent factor in determining whether or not she will bear her first child while still an adolescent herself.²⁶

21 Lanza Meneses, Martha. For Plan 2012 'Because I am a Girl' report. Roudi, Farzaneh and Valentine M. Moghadam. 'Empowering Women, Developing Society: Female Education in the Middle East and North Africa.' Washington DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2003. 22 Malhotra, Anju, Rohini Pande and Caren Grown. 'Impacts of Investments in Female Education on Gender Equality.' Washington DC: ICRW, 2003; Herz, Barbara and Gene B. Sperling. 'What Works in Girls' Education: Evidence and Policies from the Developing World.' New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2004; Rihani, May A, Lisa Kays and Stephanie Psaki. 'Keeping the Promise: Five Benefits of Girls' Secondary Education.' Washington DC: AED Academy for Educational Development, 2006. 23 DFID. 'Choices for women: planned pregnancies, safe births and healthy newborns: The UK's Framework for Results for improving reproductive, maternal and newborn health in the developing world.' London: DFID, 2010. 24 Temin, Miriam, Ruth Levine, and Nandini Oomman. 'Why it's the right time: Moving on Reproductive Health Goals by Focusing on Adolescent Girls.' Washington DC: Women Deliver, 2010. Citing: Ainsworth, Martha, and Innocent Semali. 'Who is Most Likely to Die of AIDS? Socioeconomic Correlates of Adult Deaths in Kagera Region, Tanzania.' In: Ainsworth, M., L. Fransen and M. Over (Eds.). 'Confronting AIDS: Evidence from the Developing World.' Brussels: The European Commission, 1998. Jejeebhoy, S. J., 'Women's Education, Autonomy, and Reproductive Behaviour: Experience from Developing Countries.' Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995; Lloyd, Cynthia and Barbara Mensch. 'Implications of Formal Schooling for Girls' Transitions to Adulthood in Developing Countries.' in (Eds.) Bledsoe, Caroline H., 'Critical Perspectives on Schooling and Fertility in the Developing World.' Washington DC: The National Academies Press, 1999; United Nations. 'Women's Education and Fertility Behavior: Recent Evidence from the Demographic and Health Surveys.' New York: United Nations, 1995. 25 Marphatia, Akanksha A., 'Creating an enabling environment for girls' and women's participation in education.' Paper presented at the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) Expert Group Meeting 'Enhancing Participation of Women in Development through an Enabling Environment for Achieving Gender Equality and the Advancement of Women,' Bangkok, Thailand, 8-11 November 2005. Citing: Klasen, S. 'Does Gender Inequality Reduce Growth and Development? Evidence from Cross-Country Regressions. Policy Research Report on Gender and Development Working Paper 7.' Washington DC: World Bank, 1999. 26 Temin, Miriam, Ruth Levine, and Nandini Oomman. 'Why it's the right time: Moving on Reproductive Health Goals by Focusing on Adolescent Girls.' Washington DC: Women Deliver, 2010. Citing: Gupta, Neeru and Mary Mahy. 'Adolescent Childbearing in Sub-Saharan Africa: Can increased schooling alone raise ages at first birth?' Demographic Research, 8, 4 (2003), <http://www.demographic-research.org/Volumes/Vol8/4/8-4.pdf>.

THE PROTECTIVE ROLE OF EDUCATION²⁷

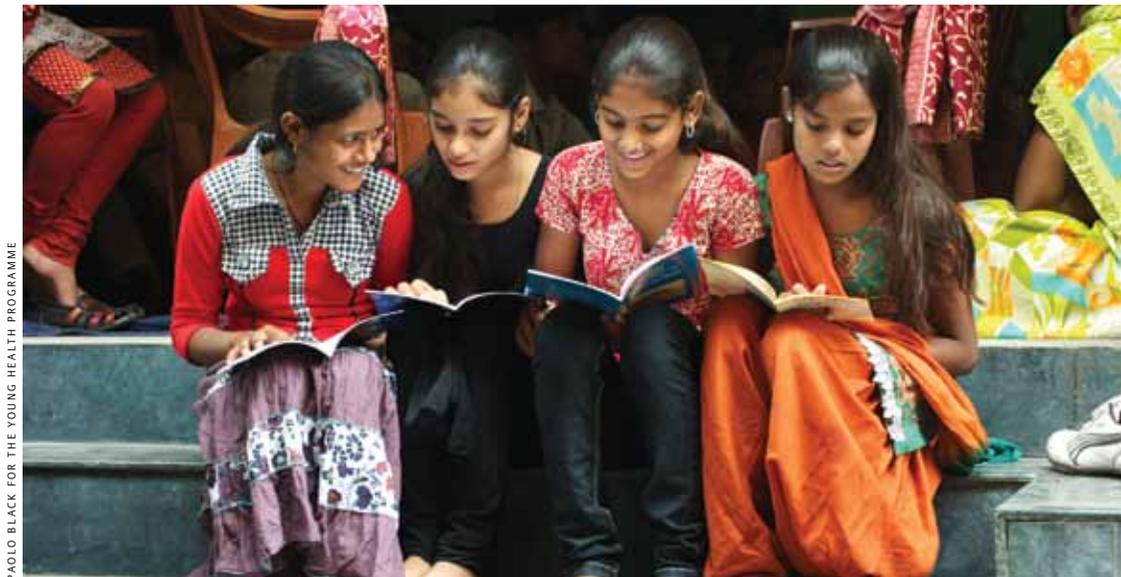
There has been a lot of work on breaking the silence around the violence against girls which can occur in and around schools. Girls experience gender-based violence on the way to school, at school, and as a consequence of aspirations nurtured through school.²⁸ What this focus in research has perhaps masked is the value of education in providing girls with confidence, insights and networks to challenge the gender inequitable norms and power balances which are associated with violence.

Not only are women who are educated to secondary level or higher less likely than their non-educated or primary-educated counterparts to experience violence, but men who are educated to secondary level or higher are less likely than their non-educated or primary-educated counterparts to perpetrate violence:

- Women in 11 out of 14 countries analysed, who had been educated to secondary level or higher, were less likely to experience violence.
- In nine out of the 14 countries, a smaller proportion of husbands with higher levels of education have carried out physical or sexual violence. It appears that more schooling for men may limit some levels of physical and sexual violence against their wives.
- For men in most countries, continuing schooling beyond the primary level decreases the risk of committing violence.

Education seems to shift attitudes and cycles of violence can be broken as women become more likely to report it, or to join together to fight against gender-based violence and to campaign for progressive laws. In Nigeria, 71 per cent of women with no education think that violence is justified when a woman leaves the house without telling her husband, compared to 33 per cent of women with secondary education or higher. In Kenya, 61 per cent of women with no education think that violence is justified if a woman argues with her husband, compared to 52 per cent of primary educated women, but only 27 per cent of women with secondary education or higher.

(For a fuller account and the accompanying data please go to the main 2012 'Because I am a Girl' report.)



PAOLO BLACK FOR THE YOUNG HEALTH PROGRAMME

²⁷ Charley Nussey, Institute of Education, University of London. ²⁸ Leach, Fiona. 'Gender Violence in Schools in the Developing World.' *Gender and Education*, 18, No. 1 (2006); Laurie, Emily. 'Plan's Learn Without Fear campaign: Campaign Progress Report.' Working: Plan International, 2010; Leach, Fiona and Claudia Mitchell (Eds.). 'Combating Gender Violence In and Around Schools.' Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books, 2006; Parkes, Jenny and Jo Heslop. 'Stop Violence Against Girls in School: A cross-country analysis of baseline research from Ghana, Kenya and Mozambique.' London: ActionAid, 2011; Antonowicz, Laetitia. 'Too Often in Silence: A Report on School-Based Violence in West and Central Africa.' UNICEF, Plan West Africa, Save the Children Sweden West Africa and ActionAid, 2010.



JIRO OSE

The true promise of equality

There is nowhere in the world today where women are equal to men. Four categories of empowerment have been identified by the World Economic Forum. These are: equality in economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. But in not one country do women's achievements match or exceed men's.²⁹ This means that whenever and wherever girls and women strive for the same treatment and access as boys and men, they are still held back, paid less, or not heard.

Discrimination affects the lives of girls and women from infancy to adulthood. It contributes to high infant and childhood mortality, to low educational achievement, and to failures to protect children from harm. It also affects the economic survival of families and the participation of children and young people in family and community decisions. Many violations of children's rights have their roots in gender-based inequality, exclusion and injustice. This report argues that education should play both a protective and a transformative role in building a society that

respects the rights of all its members. In focusing on the experiences of adolescent girls and the particular barriers they face in accessing a good-quality education, we are advocating not just for their rights as individuals but for their right to be active and creative members of the communities they live in. The girls we have met and talked to in the course of our research have demonstrated their capabilities, enthusiasm and determination. They know the value of education, and listening to the voices of Talent, Gloria, Ayesha and Elizabeth we can see them fighting for the choices they want to make. In supporting girls like these we are also supporting something broader – the true promise of equality.

GLORIA THE MECHANIC

"Sometimes when I go home wearing overalls, everyone starts laughing at me. They shout, 'Women should not be wearing overalls! It's not for a woman! It's a man's work!' They think that I am a big embarrassment. But I stay strong because I know I am doing the right thing. I am very happy and very proud: what a man can do, a woman can also do.

I am one of the first female mechanics to train at Juba Technical High School. Look around South Sudan and you see male mechanics everywhere: no women. But I say it's good for me to take on the role.

I am studying everything about cars. I have learned so many things – how to take apart the engine; the gears; the radiator. If a car fails, I know how to fix it.

In South Sudan, if you don't have contacts, you will search up and down and you will not find a job. But if you know how to build, or be a carpenter, or be an auto mechanic, it's much easier: you'll get a job. That's why I decided to come to this training school.

When you are married in this country, the husband will not allow you to work. Even if you read, even if you have finished all your school, he will not allow you to work. In the future, I want to be a very successful auto mechanic. I think I am a good role model. Sometimes people in high positions encourage me and advise me and tell me I'm a good example. I make them happy as they just cannot believe that a lady can do such things!"

Gloria Joy, 18, Trainee Auto Mechanic, Plan International's Juba Technical High School, South Sudan

²⁹ Hausmann, Richard, Laura D. Tyson and Saadia Zahidi. 'The Global Gender Gap Report 2011.' Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2011. 30 FAWE. 'Yemane plans to go for the highest degree available.' <http://www.fawe.org/resource/voices/yemane/index.php> (last accessed 29 May 2012).

‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ update

Now in its sixth year, the ‘Real Choices, Real Lives’ study follows 142 girls living in nine countries around the world – Benin, Brazil, Cambodia, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Philippines, Togo, Uganda and Vietnam. The study aims to achieve a better understanding of young girls’ lives through in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions with their relatives and others who live around them. The majority of the girls taking part in the study are now either attending a pre-school facility or are at primary school. A small number of girls are still not enrolled in school, their parents citing distance to school and the girls’ poor health as reasons for this.

Generally, parents continue to express pride in their girls’ progress in school. At the same time, they are becoming increasingly vocal about the quality of education their daughters receive. Several parents repeatedly asserted that they would send their daughters to better schools if they could afford to do so or if it were safe for the girls to travel on their own to a better school further from home.

Many of the families taking part in the study have reported that the cost of living has risen over the past year, and many have had to cover additional medical costs. For most, the greater part of their income is spent on food. But for many, raising a young family also means having to cover some of the costs of sending their children to school.



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Girl drawing, Cambodia

Now we are six

This year, the girls taking part in Plan’s cohort study will reach the age of six – quite a milestone in their lives. Most of them are now attending school, so this is the year when influences outside the home start to have a bigger impact on their lives. They will meet a wider range of people and although their mothers will remain the key influences and role models, teachers, friends and older children will also become increasingly important to them.

At home, it is the women of the family whom the girls spend their time with and they are already mimicking female household work while they play and some, even at six, are being set household tasks clearly defined by gender. Davy from Cambodia wants to be a teacher but also told us: *“I like to wash dishes as well and help my mother to collect firewood.”*

Life stories

For this year’s report we have conducted in-depth interviews with the girls’ mothers, taking them on the journey from their own childhood, through the

life changes and critical decisions made during adolescence, to their lives today as mothers. Last year we spoke with almost 100 of the girls’ fathers. The differences between these two sets of interviews are illuminating, particularly in terms of the men’s experiences of adolescence. This is when life’s opportunities seem to open up for boys and where they close down for girls.

Most of the girls’ mothers tell of lives lived through interrupted ambitions and failed dreams. Many reported entering domestic service at adolescence. They recalled that this not only had a negative impact on their formal education, but also that many of them were abused and ill-treated, sometimes by their own relatives. Through the women’s life stories, we see how adolescence was such a critical time for them. This was when they were given more household responsibilities which ultimately affected their educational prospects. Several of them were married at around the age of 14, and this marked the point

at which their formal education stopped. For those girls who become pregnant, the school environment becomes an unforgiving place, and pregnancy also effectively ends their school career.

Changing times

While the women describe clearly defined household divisions of labour – and it is apparent that these male/female divisions are widely followed – what does seem to be slowly emerging is the recognition that school-age girls need extra time for homework, leisure and rest. Ines, Saily's grandmother in the Dominican Republic, says: "I would like them always to remember what I wanted them to be. That they learn, that they study, that I never said: you don't go to school today because you have to wash the clothes, because you have to wash the dishes, or because you have to do something. No, I left them alone so that they could study."

As women who are mostly in their twenties and thirties, the mothers of the girls have themselves grown up in a time of rapid social change. On the whole, the women acknowledge that they are living in a time of change and that greater opportunities now exist for women and for girls.

The most striking responses overall are the women's overwhelmingly positive attitude towards girls' education. Almost all of the women interviewed responded to the question "What are your hopes for your daughter's future?" by saying that they would hope for their daughters to be better educated than they were. Some went on to explain that in small ways they are disrupting the status quo in preparing their daughters for a better future. Miremba's mother Lily, in Uganda, explains: "I always think about their future. I have always encouraged them to go to school. I bought goats and chicken for the boys and bought plots of land for the girls, since the boys can always find land at their father's place."

Six year-old Dariana from the Dominican Republic is definitely picking up on the aspirations of her mother's generation. When asked what she wants to do when she grows up, her confident response is, "***I want to go to university***".

Across almost every one of the families with daughters in the Cohort Study, the recurring refrain "things are changing" is a reason for optimism. Mothers in particular want a different and better life for their girls and see education as being the route to this. Will their commitment be enough to overcome the combined obstacles of poverty and entrenched ideas of male and female roles? Can these six year-old girls realise their full potential in societies and families where their rights, especially to an education, are respected? As we continue to track the girls through their first decade of life, our optimism will be tested as poverty and discrimination undermine everybody's good intentions.



Girl with her grandmother, Dominican Republic

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Girl at home, Dominican Republic

PLAN

Call to Action

- 1 Ensure any post-MDG framework maintains a strong priority on Education, but broaden our ambition to include the successful completion of at least nine years of quality education, with an intentional emphasis on gender equality.
- 2 Commit to undertake a gender review of government Education Sector Plans and support action to address the identified gaps.
- 3 Expand funding mechanisms to support quality education for girls.

MDG 3 puts gender equality at the heart of international policy. It is an ambitious goal that has to be tackled at all levels of society and will mean far-reaching changes in the world in which we live. How can we measure the status of girls and women within their families and communities to monitor real gender equality? How can levels of gender-based violence be reduced and the equality of decision-making at home and work be increased? How can we make sure that women are paid equally and girls equipped to play an equal role in society? Education of both girls and boys is key. Equality of opportunity at school, providing a good-quality education and making sure that girls can benefit from it, is crucial. Education alone may not be sufficient to transform the society we live in, but transformation can never be achieved without it. By caring about how education can contribute to girls' increased agency, educators and governments and girls themselves can find ways to design an education that truly supports girls to live freer and more fulfilling lives, and transforms the world around them.

"I am the only one in my family who attended university. I am a role model in my family and my community, and I always try to encourage the girls of my village to strive for the best despite the poverty that seems to be a barrier to their dreams."

Firehiwot Yemane, 24, Ethiopia³⁰

"No enduring solution to the major changes of our day – from climate change to political and economic instability to poverty – can be solved without the full participation of the world's women and girls. This means paying real attention to the State of the World's Girls. By providing evidence and calls to action, Plan's series of reports, and the 'Because I am a Girl' Global Campaign, help all of us to advance gender equality as our individual and collective responsibility."

Michelle Bachelet

UN Women Executive Director, Foreword, 2012 'Because I am a Girl' report

Take action at: becauseiamagirl.org

BECAUSE I am a Girl